

Long Live The Outlaw Switchmen!

By James Patrick

After many months of hard battling against the combined forces of the railroad corporations, the Government and the craft union officialdom, the "outlaw" switchmen in several cities have voted to call off their strike and go back to work, forfeiting their seniority rights and failing to gain the formal recognition of their demands. At first view the result appears to be a victory for the railroads, their government and their "labor lieutenants", and a defeat for the brave workers who defied them; but they who look beneath the surface and measure this great and heroic endeavor by the yardstick of revolutionary progress, will read a different story.

If we accept the view of the Gompers school of unionism that trade unions exist only for the purpose of holding the ground that has already been gained and that "collective bargaining" is the summit of our hopes, we must measure the success or failure of a strike by the definite and concrete results directly achieved. On the other hand, if we look upon the organized labor movement as machinery for revolution, strikes become to us as preliminary skirmishes wherein we try out our strength, lay bare to ourselves our own weakness and learn by the penalty suffered to throw them off. This latter is the view-point of labor's vanguard all over the world and from this angle we can now calmly examine this strike of the switchmen; count up our gains and losses; take to heart the lessons driven home by it and prepare for another struggle on a larger scale.

The Curse Of Craft Unionism

The strike of the outlaw switchmen brought out in bold relief the curse of craft unionism. These strikers had not only to contend with the crooked and conservative officers of their own Unions who shamelessly sold them out to the bosses, but they were hamstrung by the infamous practice which authorized other bodies of union men, whose interests and whose sympathies were one with theirs, to remain at work and thus become, in effect, strike breakers. Every worker on the railroads who stuck to the job during the period of this strike was acting as an ally of the bosses and an enemy of his own

class. It does not remedy the situation to say that he had a union card in his pocket—that only made him a union scab. The man who is about to be hung will not be comforted by the knowledge that the rope bears the union label.

One result of this strike ought to be, and will be, a mighty stimulant to industrial unionism throughout the transportation industry. What better object lesson could be given for the need of one union on the railroads? To get the One Big Union idea planted in the minds of railroad men, and to see the beginning of organization on this line actually under way, is worth "losing" a dozen strikes. Such defeats will lead us on to victory.

The Government At Work

It is safe to say that the switchmen know a great deal more now about the nature of the government than they did at the outset of the revolt. Many of them had served it in the recent world slaughter engineered by the exploiters of labor; more of them helped it by "hitting the ball" a little harder on the job—all with the idea that the government really represented them; that it was their friend and protector. Consequently it scarcely occurred to them that when the time came for them to fight for bread they would find this powerful instrument of physical force arrayed against them. How quickly they were disillusioned! Arrests, indictments and intimidation confronted them at every turn. Their natural leaders—forceful, honest men who sprang up out of the ranks to place the criminals who betrayed them—were hounded and persecuted and denounced by Attorney-General Palmer and his army of bloodhounds. The wage commission, appointed by President Wilson under pressure of the strike, ignored the real union of the workers' choice—The Yardmen's Association—and negotiated exclusively with the traitor organizations, the Switchmen's union and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen.

Experience is the best teacher, says the old proverb. Here is experience enough to teach a lesson about the government that should never be forgotten by those who came in direct conflict with it. They have seen it in action, stripped of all pretense, and openly serving the bosses against